

SOUTHERN FICTION: SOUTHERN SMALL-TOWN CULTURE AND ITS LANDMARKS

Candice Whitney Norvetta Lawrence

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Southern Fiction: Southern Small-Town Culture and its Landmarks

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This manuscript consists of an analysis of Olive Ann Burns, Lee Smith, and Candice Lawrence's writings. It examines the effect of small-town culture in the South as well as the significance of landmarks. It also discusses the ways in which characters either construct or rebel against the social norms of a small town and how time acts as an invisible means of providing communities with a way to create and enforce social hierarchy and a complete destruction of privacy.

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By

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Southern Small-Town Culture

Southern small-town culture is marked by a close-knit community's strict societal expectations and hierarchy, the undeniable familiarity of all the residents and their business in a particular small town such as Bloomingdale, Georgia; and a resistance or inability to be affected by time. The second element—familiarity—functions not always as a means of nosiness but as a direct result of the unavoidable interconnectivity that is formed by generations of neighbors and relatives growing up together and never leaving their hometown. A final characteristic of the small-town culture is the significance of landmarks—both in a geographical and manmade sense. These elements and traits largely compose the small-town culture demonstrated throughout Lee Smith's *Oral History*, Olive Ann Burns's *Cold Sassy Tree*, and Candice Lawrence's short stories "Glimpse", "That Kinda Courage", and "Back Stabbin' Mrs. Betty".

Before we examine these components, let's take a moment to define what is meant by "Southern small-town culture." Few things have remained the same in respect to the progression of Southern literature—especially when referring to contemporary Southern literature. Still, there are some characteristics which have paradoxically become unique yet standard features of Southern literature and culture, such as the unmistakable social and often genealogical interconnectivity of a small town's residents. For the purposes of this thesis, Southern small-town culture encompasses landmarks, social interactions and hierarchy, as well as how a seemingly abundance of time uniquely affects fictional characters' perception of and reactions to reality. Candice Lawrence uses the culture found in southern small towns to zoom in on how individuals function in their environment.

Several of Lawrence's works demonstrate traits of southern local color fiction which Hamlin Garland defines as "literature with 'such quality of texture and background that it could

not have been written in any other place or by anyone else than a native” (qtd. in Skaggs 1). According to Merrill Maguire Skaggs’s *The Folk of Southern Literature*, “The local color writer identif[ies] himself by emphasizing local peculiarities and traditions which made the characters or physical area described sound unique” (1). Skaggs also points out that, “local color fiction is thoroughly permeated with sentimentality. Though social criticism appears in these stories, it is usually of a general nature. Pointed social criticism is not often found in local color” (4). In considering some of Lawrence’s works such as “That Kinda Courage” and “Glimpse”, it is apparent that she focuses on accurately depicting the society her characters live in, leaving the audience to determine their own views on what this portrayal is saying.

While they are not interchangeable, societal expectations and social hierarchy correspond with one another in terms of small-town culture. Societal expectations refer to the implied social rules or social norms found within a small community; whereas social hierarchy tends to delve into the realm of class, race, religion, economic status; aside from these traditional classifications, social hierarchy can even branch off into divisions merely based on personality and deviations from “normal” social interactions. Olive Ann Burns clearly emphasizes this in *Cold Sassy Tree* as young Miss Love Simpson is shunned by the longtime residents of Cold Sassy because of her scandalous marriage to the much older and recently widowed Rucker Blakeslee. “Back Stabbin’ Mrs. Betty” also provides another example—albeit on an exceedingly microscopic level—of the unspoken social hierarchy in the Southern small-town community; each of the females living in the cul-de-sac fit into a subordinate level of a pyramid in which Mrs. Betty, Pooler’s longest, oldest, and most manipulative resident, is the peak.

In “Back Stabbin’ Mrs. Betty”, “That Kinda Courage”, and *Cold Sassy Tree*, the protagonists blatantly exert courage to either create their own social norms or to defy the

provisional social norms. Mrs. Betty ensures that she “always [gets] her way” (“Back Stabbin’ Mrs. Betty” 1), while Scoots allows his “gritty courage”, (“That Kinda Courage” 1) to keep him on his impossible journey to resist any form of change, and Cold Sassy’s Rucker Blakeslee completely ignores the social norms of mourning in exchange for a new bride despite the opposition from his community. These actions also place the characters into unique hierarchical positions within their society. Merrill Maguire Skaggs ties these traits to social status:

Social status is not simply based on general good character in southern local color fiction; very specific characteristics are usually approved of. Though many virtues are occasionally applauded, four are affirmed with great consistency—pride, courage, hard work, and common sense. Usually one of these four suffices to make the reader respond to a character sympathetically. (Skaggs 55)

The four traits Skaggs mentions are incorporated within “Back Stabbin’ Mrs. Betty”, “That Kinda Courage” and *Cold Sassy Tree*; oddly enough, these protagonists are so invested in “pride, courage, hard work, and common sense” that it pushes the characters over the edge of sympathy, making the reader feel more disdain or repulsion (Skaggs 55). The intensity of the traits is so strong that the characteristics almost become fatal flaws for the protagonists.

By turning the focus directly onto the lack of privacy in southern small towns like Cold Sassy, Georgia, and Pooler, Georgia, one can easily see how greatly reputations are valued within community and how easily these reputations crumble. Olive Ann Burns, Lee Smith, and Candice Lawrence all illustrate the rapidity with which information, gossip, and myths travel throughout a town where all of the residents are more than familiar with one another. In *Honor and Violence in the Old South*, Bertram Wyatt-Brown explicates both the process in which word spreads in the South and the effect this has on social constrictions or norms through stating,

"Family values [differ] not at all from public ones" (26). Furthermore, Wyatt-Brown identifies gossip as "the mechanism used to enforce restraint and hold everyone in the grip of public scrutiny...gossip was used...as the least disruptive and most effective way to impose social sanctions" (198-199). With the ever-present threat of secrets pouring, there is a serious weight placed on social reputation within these small towns. Ideally, this weight is meant to keep civilians in respectable, honorable modes; however, as Mrs. Betty and Scoots show, this is not always the case. The fact that one has no privacy in small southern towns is a given; so when an individual knowingly commits actions such as having a shot-gun wedding three weeks after being widowed or allowing one's house to become filled with rodents and unsanitary items, it shows a blatant lack of regard for societal norms.

Time is the medium which allows the existence of social hierarchy and social expectation in southern small towns to fester. It has an interesting effect on life in close-knit communities, either slowing indefinitely or seeming to be nonexistent. Once an occasional, visiting outsider enters this type of setting, it immediately becomes apparent that time has little to no effect on small-town life. This isn't to say that things never change in small towns, but to highlight the slowness in which changes typically occur and to call attention to the large impact of even the smallest of changes—whether social or economic—can impose on small town residents. When things do begin to change, it happens so gradually that an outsider may hardly take notice. However, for the people who have lived their entire lives in small towns like Bloomingdale or Pooler, Georgia, one minor change could mean catastrophic events such as losing a childhood home. In the South, time acts as an invisible link connecting society to place in that it moves so slowly that people seem to have ample amount of time to focus on social expectations within the setting of their small communities. Furthermore, time may act as a catalyst for characters to

reflect on their surrounding landmarks. This is overtly present in "That Kinda Courage" when Scoots refuses to give up his deceased mother's house, symbolizing Scoots' reluctance to accept the passing of time and the inevitable changes which come with it; the opposite effect is also present during "Back Stabbin' Mrs. Betty" as Mrs. Betty routinely drives around Pooler, satisfactorily assessing the growth of the small-town.

In respect to a significance of landmarks in Southern culture, *Oral History* shows a heightened awareness of geographical landmarks in the Appalachian Mountains. The hollers in the novel act as boundaries which ironically unite and isolate its residents. They isolate the Cantrell family by creating a geographical barricade from the remaining town, which in turn, creates a sense of closeness for the family members within the barricade. On the other hand, "That Kinda Courage" utilizes manmade landmarks to showcase the stagnancy of time in Bloomingdale, Georgia, as well as to emphasize an aversion to private and public change.

In "Place in Fiction", Eudora Welty describes place as being "where ['the writer'] has his roots, place is where he stands; in his experience out of which he writes, it provides the base of reference; in his work, the point of view." As Burns, Smith, and Lawrence tend to write in places which they have lived in for a considerable amount of time, they clearly share the practice of writing from their own experiences and environmental observations. Moreover, Welty also acknowledges how place presents a sense of "validity" within a work, something which authors Smith and Lawrence both strive to exhibit throughout their works by incorporating real locations and landmarks in their fictional worlds.

Landmarks in Lee Smith's *Oral History*

Lee Smith heavily incorporates geographical landmarks in her novel *Oral History*. The novel takes place in the Appalachian Mountains where the intertwined, creepy, and mysterious Cantrell family resides in Hoot Owl Holler. *Oral History* follows the genealogy of this Appalachian family, working from Red Emmy's curse on her lover, Almarine Cantrell, down through several generations filled with secret affairs, illegitimate children, superstitious beliefs and rumors. Still, Smith's incorporation of the Appalachian setting and culture plays as much of a role in the story as the characters.

Hoot Owl Holler is often described as being separate from the rest of the community in the Hoot Owl Mountains, which spurs the mysterious, haunting feel regarding the Cantrell family. The elevation of Hoot Owl Holler also creates a sense of isolation, easily opening itself to superstitious tales and curses which seem to envelope characters like Almarine and Pricey Jane. In the novel's opening scene, Ora Mae notices "it's getting dark now, down here by Grassy Creek, but high up in Hoot Owl Holler it's still light," (Smith 15), which both highlights how the land's geography forces a divide between the secretive family members inhabiting the mountain top versus everyone else who avoided the peak for fear of the curse of Red Emmy, Almarine's alleged sorceress of a first wife, and how there seems to be something particularly enchanting about Hoot Owl Holler.

Throughout the course of the varying narrations within the novel, Hoot Owl Holler physically changes as much as a person changes during different stages of life. Just in the first two or three narrations alone, Hoot Owl transforms from a well harvested land to a grim place reeking of gloom then to a peaceful loving home. During outsider Richard Burlage's narrative, he provides extensive descriptions of the community in the mountains of Virginia:

I found myself astounded by the changes along the road. Tiny ugly frame houses and makeshift shacks had mostly replaced the log cabins I remembered; or those cabins had been fronted and boarded out of all resemblance to the kind of homemade simplicity I used to love. Nothing had been done with thought or care of consequence, I noted—lumber stripped and the land left, machine parts everywhere rusting, trash and refuse out in the yards in front of the homes, if you could call them that, and children—children everywhere, ragged and dirty, in the road and in the filthy bare yards along it. Even the creek itself looked different, brown and swollen, trash along its banks where evidently it had flooded, not so long ago. I drove slowly and deliberately up the hazardous hairpin turns of Hurricane Mountain; rounding a final curve, I found myself on a kind of overlook from which I could make wide-angle shots of the Blackey Coal Camp which occupied now the entire holler where the old woman named Granny Younger used to live. (Smith 224)

This excerpt functions as a means of noting the effect time has on these small communities in the eyes of an outsider. In “‘What a Wild and Various State’: Virginia in Lee Smith’s Oral History”, Martha Bilips confirms that the purpose of Richard Burlage’s lengthy narrative is “to emphasize the geographic and cultural diversity of Virginia” (37). Similar to so many of Smith’s other characters’ expansive observations, this excerpt also shows Smith’s mastery in painting more than a 2-Dimensional picture with words. Smith has a way of bringing her audience—those who are from the Appalachian region and those who have yet to view it for themselves—into a precise setting by appealing to nearly all five of the human senses—just short of literal touch.

Lee Smith's focus on physical landmarks and setting is no accident; she is always consciously aware of surroundings. In an interview with Charline McCord, Smith states, "Places are very important to me and to be able to physically place my stories in a house and a landscape and a state is really important." Like many writers, Smith grounds her stories in settings where she has personal experience. In the same interview, Smith explains that she grew up in Virginia listening to family members and friends tell stories ranging from folklore to mundane events of day-to-day life in Appalachia.

In an interview with Elfrieda Abbe, Smith declares: "I'm a writer of whom place is very important. I have maps of everything. With *Oral History*, I had a big map that I'd drawn out on the wall. I was using the actual names of places that are in the county I was from. It had the Hurricane Mountains, Hoot Owl Mountain and Holler, Grassy Creek, Black Rock Mountain, and the Dismal River. All these are real, but I made my own map to suit my [fictional] purposes for the story." It is clear that in Smith's prewriting stages, accuracy is key; she gathers as much authentic information as possible so that she can weave it into her stories in a way that is both original and effective. Smith also explicates this through stating, "In the South, sense of place implies who you are and what your family did. Even if I write a short story, I have to make diagrams of what the character's house looks like and where the house is in relation to the town" (McDonald).

Small Town Life in Olive Ann Burns's *Cold Sassy Tree*

Olive Ann Burns's novel, *Cold Sassy Tree*, strongly portrays the societal norms during the early 1900s within the small southern town of Cold Sassy; these norms are illustrated through the traditional mourning over Mattie Lou, narrator Will Tweedy's deceased grandmother. The novel alludes to mourning as an extensive period of time in which a family dons black attire from head to toe and disengages in any activities, such as festive social gatherings, which would imply a sense of joy during a time when there is supposed to be great sorrow. The town's shock and resentment towards Rucker Blakeslee's sudden marriage to Miss Love Simpson during a time when he of all people should be mourning his late wife, calls attention to the importance of social expectations and a lack of privacy within southern small-town culture.

Bertram Wyatt-Brown explains that public and private expectations are interchangeable in the South (26). This is demonstrated throughout *Cold Sassy* as characters such as Will and his Aunt Carrie attempt to follow the social norms of mourning in order to avoid any scandal within the town. Even though Will and his grandfather view the traditional notions of mourning as excessive and over the top, they are still very much aware of the consequences of breaking social expectations in Cold Sassy. Furthermore, although Rucker Blakeslee is aware of the social norms, he does part fairly quickly with the old town's traditions, freeing himself from constraints of social expectations. In *Society in the Novel*, Elizabeth Langland describes the conflict which arises when characters are restricted by society. She asserts that once "individual potential meets social possibility...the result is some personal limitation or sacrifice" (Langland 11). For Rucker Blakeslee, his personal limitation was the social norm of Cold Sassy, while his sacrifice is subjecting himself to being the center of the town's gossip.

Glimpse The gossip and speculation in *Cold Sassy* further emphasizes the need to abide by the social expectations and exposes the lack of privacy within the town. Bertram Wyatt-Brown breaks down Southern qualifications for social norms:

(1) Honor as immortalizing valor, particularly in the character of revenge against familial and community enemies; (2) opinions of others as an indispensable part of personal identity and gauge of self-worth; (3) physical appearance and ferocity of will as signs of inner merit; and (4) defense of male integrity and mingled fear and love of woman. (Wyatt-Brown 27)

With having the continuous pressure to ensure these qualifications are met, it is easy to see how much of an impact society has on its individuals; likewise, Wyatt-Brown's most significant realization is that of the "opinions of others" as being "an indispensable part of personal identity" confirms there is not a sense of privacy (27). This is why most of the characters in *Cold Sassy* take necessary precautions to prevent damaging their reputations; they are fully aware of the inseparable bond between their public and private lives, furthermore, any shame within their private lives would have gone on display for the whole town to criticize—as they openly do with Rucker Blakeslee.

Acting as a symbolic landmark in "Glimpse," the moon appears and disappears during the course of Ayoli's journey. For Ayoli, the moon signifies the easiest times to have faith or believe that she and her family are protected. In its absence, the moon becomes a symbol of the darker times in life where one cannot see a solution or an escape from his or her troubles. Another symbolic landmark for Ayoli is the sight of the longhouse. Once she gets first sight of it, she seems to feel a slight sense of accomplishment and protection. She knows that she has at least made it to the people who should have the answers and keep her safe.

Glimpse

"Glimpse" is a short story which blends Christian beliefs with Native American practices. While it does not have as many explicit landmarks and signs of southern small-town culture found in Candice Lawrence's other works, "Glimpse" does have traits of the tight-knit community similar to those found in a small town.

In regards to the landmarks noted throughout the story, there is a mixture of modern elements such as the house that Ayoli's family resides in and traditional elements such as the longhouse that the councilmen gather in. These combinations represent the blending of the cultures while showing the cultural boundaries of this Cherokee tribe. Even in present day Native American settings, there are traits which parallel, such as the belief of supernatural beings which often provide help and protection to those in harmful circumstances or guidance when one is lost. In this case, the Cherokee believe the *yunwi tsunsdi*, or "little people" tend to hide out in forests, protecting and guiding lost children (Lawrence 1). On the other hand, traditional Christian angels often provide a similar protection and guidance on some occasion, regardless of the individual's age. However, unlike the traditional Christian angels, the *yunwi tsunsdi* are known to have a mischievous side along with quick tempers.

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Since the Native Americans in "Glimpse" all possess the same beliefs and all have formed an alliance against any entity—in this case, the coyote—which could wreak havoc on their settlement, there is a strong sense of united community present within the story. For example, the tribal members have an agreement to send out warnings of any potential harm in their community. Furthermore, there seems to be an unspoken understanding between the adults of the story about the supernatural. When the chief tells Ayoli, "All will be well, now," (Lawrence 7), one can't help but wonder if Winona and the councilmen knew Ulisi was destined to pass away that night.

Moreover, once Ayoli arrives at the council, she inquires about the location of her mother to the tribal men; this scene has no introductions of the characters to each other because that connection is already present. The way the councilmen and Ayoli interact with one another implies that they have known each other for a while and each character knows how the other functions within their Native American community. For example, the dialogue within the scene would have been very different had Ayoli not previously known the councilmen. Likewise, that conversation—a conversation which exudes tension and suspense—would have been interrupted with stock introductory commentary, slowing down the story's pacing and level of suspense.

"Glimpse" subtly extracts many characteristics found in small southern towns and places them into a somewhat modern Native American setting. Candice Lawrence incorporates elements to symbolize the closeness of the tribal members, such as understanding vague or unspoken communication. She also provides the reader with standard, minor symbolic landmarks to convey a sense of familiarity, protection, and achievement.

That Kinda Courage

Candice Lawrence's short story "That Kinda Courage" depicts a man named Scoots who cannot adjust to change. Scoots struggles with adapting to some of the smallest changes such as reorganizing and cleaning his house for fear of losing touch with the memories of his life. While Scoots's case is extreme, it highlights the attitudes towards the process of change in a small town setting. Not many things change in towns such as Bloomingdale, Georgia, so for Scoots, any minor change is automatically magnified.

Scoots is not the only one who picks up on the stagnancy of time in suburban life; since time passes so slowly and things rarely change, people involuntarily shift their focus to each other. As the short story shows, life in a small town creates a unique, inescapable bond between all its residents; not only do these people all know each other but they also know what is and has been going on in each other's lives for generations. It is not always a matter of nosiness or gossiping tendencies, but a means of forming a lasting community in a place which rarely changes.

It is important to realize that "That Kinda Courage" is not meant to be a negative critique of small town life but merely an accurate depiction of how a character like Scoots would function in this type of setting. Scoots could not—and would not—survive in a metropolitan area. Life would be too fast paced for his liking. Clearly, Scoots is not a weak individual; with his strong-mindedness and quick wit, he has all the makings of a self-efficient, confident individual, who, when given the opportunity, could easily run the town of Bloomingdale; yet, his personality would not be well suited in a city where people are constantly in a rush and rarely have time to acknowledge each other.

Many of the landmarks in "That Kinda Courage" such as June's corner store and the El Cheapo gas station contribute to the small-town feel. Bloomingdale, Georgia's "main drag"—also known as Highway 80—contains nearly everything a town would need to survive. While over the past six years, this strip has made slight changes such as destroying some of the more rundown, small houses, building small Ma and Pa companies, and making room for the occasional big business like Auto Parts (which looks oddly out of place in comparison to its country surroundings), there is still more evidence that Bloomingdale was meant to be and always will be a small town. The fact that Bloomingdale in itself has remained the same for nearly twenty years and that Scoots grows so determined to keeping things from changing, emphasizes the permanency that often pervades small towns. It also proves that time has no true effect on small-town life.

re of—such as the fireworks idea— or that she knew would create a sense of shock or fear. While observant, all knowing neighbor characters can be oversimplified as being "nice neighbors;" Mrs. Betty's attentiveness clearly has a larger, more complex motive. Her observance stems from a desire to ensure nothing devastating occurs which will damage the opportunities she sees in Pooler, Georgia. As the narrator explains, "It wasn't just her reputation that kept her needing to stay in control, though. She had her own plans for Pooler. She wanted business, people, opportunity... without having to wait for fate to provide them" (Lawrence 5). The fact that Mrs. Betty is so in tune with the progressive side of Pooler highlights the contrast between small southern towns which seem to remain the same for all time and small towns which mistakenly seem to pop up new small businesses every two weeks until the town is nearly unrecognizable.

The social hierarchy within the cul-de-sac is an interesting dynamic. It is not based on finance, gender, race, or any of the other stereotypical hierarchical norms, but on sheer

Back Stabbin' Mrs. Betty

Candice Lawrence's "Back Stabbin' Mrs. Betty" takes a heightened approach toward showing the sense of small-town community through the microscopic lens of one cul-de-sac. The residents of The Lakes may not be the best of friends—or neighbors for that matter—however, they do have a strong sense of communication and knowledge of their surroundings.

Throughout the story, Mrs. Betty is depicted as an observant, all knowing character (although she is not to be mistaken for a God-like figure especially considering her blackmailing ways). She often finds out her neighbors' business without having been told directly. This adds to the eeriness of her presence by making her an omniscient type of character. The story's climax presents several examples of Mrs. Betty spewing knowledge which her neighbors either didn't know she was aware of—such as the fireworks idea— or that she knew would create a sense of shock or fear. While observant, all knowing neighbor characters can be oversimplified as being "nosy neighbors;" Mrs. Betty's attentiveness clearly has a larger, more complex motive. Her observance stems from a desire to ensure nothing devastating occurs which will damage the opportunities she sees in Pooler, Georgia. As the narrator explains, "It wasn't just her reputation that kept her needing to stay in control, though. She had her own plans for Pooler. She wanted business, people, opportunity... without having to wait for fate to provide them" (Lawrence 5). The fact that Mrs. Betty is so in tune with the progressive side of Pooler highlights the contrast between small southern towns which seem to remain the same for all time and small towns which sneakily seem to pop up new small businesses every two weeks until the town is nearly unrecognizable.

The social hierarchy within the cul-de-sac is an interesting dynamic. It is not based on finance, gender, race, or any of the other stereotypical hierarchical terms, but on sheer

personality. Mrs. Betty, knowingly being the most manipulative, boldest, and feared of her neighbors, is ranked as superior to those in her community. She does not necessarily look down on her quirky neighbors; however, she does not classify herself as being on their level. Sandra Resano seems to be next in line—although it's crucial to note that there is a vast, unattainable gap between Mrs. Betty and her neighbors—of the hierarchy. Unlike her neighbors, Sandra has the potential to stake out her claims and according to Mrs. Betty, she has done it before by bending and breaking rules. Yet, her laziness is her strongest downfall. Next Ginny Dinchen, gives one a sense of the hectic housewife who just can't seem to keep up with the pace of life. She often forgets, loses, or confuses schedules, notes, calendars and things of the like, showing that she is in no position to administer the organization and control that Mrs. Betty does. Then there is Kity Doc Crinn who is an organized ball of confused knowledge. With her lack of people skills and her tendency to be condescending, she fails to realize her own place in the community. Lastly, Daphene J. Ross, is the newest neighbor and the one least accustomed to how Mrs. Betty is able to control and manipulate not only the cul-de-sac but also the entire neighborhood and the town of Pooler. Daphene does have the sophistication that Mrs. Betty admires, but because she is so frivolous and unconcerned about her own surroundings, she is ultimately placed in the lowest category of the cul-de-sac hierarchy. These classifications are on a somewhat microscopic scale; however, many small towns often have hierarchies similar to these classifications presented in "Back Stabbin' Mrs. Betty."

It's true that Mrs. Betty knows more about what is going on in her community than anyone else, but her neighbors also show the open communication resulting from small-town life. In this story, many repetitive transitional scenes such as how Sandra and Ginny learn about the luau as well as the scene(s) where Kity and Ginny learn about Sandra backing out of the

dinner, are eliminated. Without these scenes, it is easier for the audience to understand both how quickly information in small towns spread and how word gets around but often the source goes unacknowledged. This further proves the strength of communication and knowledge in small towns.

about my work—where applicable—so that my fiction is even more believable to myself and other readers. I found it very reassuring to learn that I am not the only person who spends weeks (and sometime months) just researching history, landmarks, street names, buildings, etc. despite having lived most of my life in said region; Lee Smith also discusses her many detailed maps of her environment in Appalachia.

It was also comforting to know that Smith pays a great deal of attention to her characters. The main thing which attracts me to any story is the believability of a character. I do not have to like the character, but I have to know him/her (their thoughts, voice, hobbies, motives, etc.) the same way that I know real people on a private level, and I have to believe that whatever it is he/she does or says within a story is true to his/her nature. For me, this type of author-character or reader-character relationship stems from one of two scenarios: 1. Writing—in character—situations which have nothing to do with the storyline, or 2. reading a fictional story with characters whom I feel like I know first-hand. The first option is an exercise I use to get in tune with a character's mind or to figure out personal quirks which can be threaded throughout the real story; the second option results in me wanting to know what or how characters are doing long after I have closed the book. After all, it is the characters themselves that capture my interest in fiction.

-Candice Lawrence

Epilogue

This study has acted as confirmation and a means of new perspective in the way I approach my own writing. It has intensified my desire to incorporate accurate descriptions throughout my work—where applicable—so that my fiction is even more believable to myself and other readers. I found it very reassuring to learn that I am not the only person who spends weeks (and sometime months) just researching history, landmarks, street names, buildings, etc. despite having lived most of my life in said region; Lee Smith also discusses her many detailed maps of her environment in Appalachia.

It was also comforting to know that Smith pays a great deal of attention to her characters. The main thing which attracts me to *any* story is the believability of a character. I do not have to like the character, but I have to *know* him/her (their thoughts, voice, hobbies, motives, etc.) the same way that I know real people on a private level, and I have to believe that whatever it is he/she does or says within a story is true to his/her nature. For me, this type of author-character or reader-character relationship stems from one of two scenarios: 1. Writing—in character—situations which have nothing to do with the storyline, or 2. reading a fictional story with characters whom I feel like I know first-hand. The first option is an exercise I use to get in tune with a character's mind or to figure out personal quirks which can be threaded throughout the real story; the second option results in me wanting to know what or how characters are doing long after I have closed the book. After all, it is the characters themselves that capture my interest in fiction.

-Candice Lawrence

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Glimpse

Candice Lawrence

My grandmother sat on the porch in her rocking chair, looking more asleep than awake with her thin, crinkled eyelids sagging into her bottom lashes. It was chilly that night. As usual, Grandmother was swaddled in three or four blankets while I used Mother's arms to shield my five-year-old self from the cool North Carolina night air. Mother sat out in the yard with me folded into her lap, plucking strands of grass. I leaned my head against her long, warm neck, feeling her throat vibrate while she and Grandmother hummed. As their chant grew softer, my restlessness faded away.

Mother began whispering a story passed down to her when she was five. She told me stars were angels. "Anidawehi," she translated. She said they'd follow me, guide me through life's darkest nights, and when the clouds, lights, and sunshine became too blinding for my weak eyes to see, I had to have faith to believe they were still there.

Even though I had never heard this story, I had heard Grandmother tell me something similar to the angels Mother was describing. I thought she called them yunwi tsunsdi'. "Like the little people, Unitsi?" I asked Mother.

"Precisely," she answered. "Except if you anger or upset yunwi tsunsdi', their evil side will surface. You must always be cautious of that, Ayoli. Have faith and you'll always be protected."

"Don't forget to tell her about the svnoyi ehi nydo, Winona," Grandma chimed.

"Ah, yes, the moon," Mother said. "Sometimes when your faith is too weak and the lights are too dark, you have to rely on the moon. In those times, all of the angels combine

together to form a full moon. Sometimes the clouds seem to overtake the moon, but they can never permanently block the light."

I squirmed farther into my mother's arms as she pointed to the glowing sphere surrounded by the angelic creatures, and the clouds backing away like cowards from the angels and the sphere. The only sounds were my mother's heart beating against my ear and Grandmother rocking away. When I turned five, Grandmother said that she passed her sight onto me and that's why I had to be her eyes. That night, I started to see and feel things far beyond what I was expected. That, too, was a family trait, or so I've heard since then.

In our tribe, once one had fully grasped their faith they didn't need to look for the stars or the moon because they already believed in their existence, even on the cloudiest of nights, on the lightest of days. Those who had become experts didn't see what the rest of us saw. They just knew. That night Mother was halfway there, balancing between unstable and unwavering faith. She could almost see what Grandmother saw. Almost.

"Ayoli," my grandmother called out to me in Cherokee, "Take me inside."

"Yes, Ulisi."

Grandmother didn't like to be approached in silence; she said it sent her bad vibes. I had wondered if it was really because it frightened her or if she thought it was rude. I placed my small hand into Grandmother's extended, cold palm. She shifted her weight from the chair onto my shoulder. Her long black and silver hair waved down her arched back to her hips and spread to cover her short, round body as she stood. I led her inside our small house, holding her hand while she felt along the walls, fingering Grandpa's prize hides to get her bearings. We stopped at the third deerskin—the one most worn away by Grandmother's fingerprints.

"We're here, Ulisi," I said, settling her in her favorite chair and re-wrapping her in blankets before going back outside to my mother.

I'd started mindlessly fidgeting with the grass again. Mother combed through my hair with her fingers occasionally slipping in deep enough to gently massage my scalp. I tilted my head in her lap to see her face. She smiled. The height of her cheekbones under the moon's silvery light cast a shadow on her skin's red undertone. Her hair was a cascading stream of blackness flowing past her shoulders. As I looked up, it seemed like the stars were dancing around her in the distant sky. No matter how much I tried to hide from it, the sleeping winds finally crept around me. The winds came for me as if I was its prey, and it, my hunter. I closed my eyes. I'd barely drowned in unconsciousness when it happened. Mother's body tensed instinctively as mine did. I also heard it: a coyote. Mother tried to hide the fear that now echoed from my eyes. Coyotes weren't good omens around here. They were normally warnings to be cautious, wary, and suspicious; but the last few times someone in our village had spotted a coyote, one of our members disappeared. Since then, we all agreed to alert each other of any signs of coyotes. Mother's face had exchanged its warmth for a look of poorly subdued panic. Within seconds, we were inside our house. Mother and Grandmother hurriedly discussed what should be done. "I will go," Mother told her bravely, but her voice didn't match her troubled face. I tugged on her hand, silently pleading with her. "Ayoli," Grandmother called out from her chair. My jaw trembled; I managed a nearly inaudible, "Y-y-yes?"

She turned her leathery face towards the sound of my voice then spoke, "Anagisdi gvdodi nasgi ageyv."

She'd said *go with her*. I didn't understand.

She explained that she wouldn't be able to keep pace with us and that Mother couldn't go by herself. And that I had to have faith and use her eyes now.

I cried against my mother's arms as we left Grandmother. "May the stars guide you," Grandmother added in a strange voice. She didn't sound afraid; but, I couldn't see why.

Mother and I made our way to the village, stopping every now and then to judge the coyote's whereabouts in relation to its howling. It was at the edge of the village. By now, the clouds had covered the moon and I could barely see. I squeezed my mother's hand for reassurance and prayed to the stars to keep us safe. I thought of Mother's story, remembering that my faith and the angels would be enough protection for the both of us. I caught Mother's eyes as they returned from glancing at the stars; she must have been praying as well. I stumbled often as we ran. Each time I tripped over tree roots, my grip on Mother's palm loosened until I was empty handed.

Frantically, I searched for her grasp but I only found my fingers intertwined with chilled air. "Unitsi?" My body ached with adrenaline as I listened for Mother to answer. "Unitsi?" The only answer was Mother Nature blowing in my ear, followed by distant howling. I was never allowed to be alone in the woods, especially at night. Somehow, my tears found the moisture to replenish themselves as they made their way from my eyes to my inherited cheekbones to the ground, where the dirt greedily sucked them away.

Pray. A voice chimed against the wind. I obeyed. The voice sounded familiar but I couldn't tell who it belonged to over the sharp sounds of my heartbeat pounding through my body.

Believe. I couldn't understand what it was I was supposed to believe in; but I remembered Mother promised I would always be protected if I had faith. I believed that.

Look. I looked upwards. I could see through the treetops again. There were thousands of small, bluish specks of twinkling light falling from the sky. As they drifted closer to the ground, I saw small faces, arms, legs. Undoubtedly, these were the creatures Grandmother told me about—except they had wings like angels. One hovered a few inches from my eyes; she was the one who had spoken to me, I recognized her voice as she instructed me to run.

Hundreds of the angelic little people came together, forming a moving ball of light. I followed, trusting that they'd lead me to safety and protect my mother as well. I reached out to touch my guides, but the wind from my finger's movement pushed the dainty ball forward. I ran faster. Again, I heard howling, but now it was closer.

I saw a faint hint of rusty-red belonging to the longhouse where the council stayed. At first, I didn't notice the angel people's light dimming, but soon, small groups of the winged figures gradually turned into glittering specks floating back towards the sky. I kept running until the only light left was the sight of the fire outside the longhouse. I sprinted past one of the watchmen and darted inside. I searched the alarmed faces, none belonging to my mother. I had all of their attention yet only Adohi, one of the members, approached me. His brother was the first member who had gone missing, and since then, Adohi spent most of his time in the forest searching for him.

I tried to speak but my lungs failed me. All I could force were broken phrases.

"Wayaha," I whispered, "The edge of the forest."

Adohi turned to the chief.

"Wayaha, on the edge of the forest," I repeated.

The chief nodded once to Adohi then called for some of the councilmen to signal the warning to the village. Once more, the stares returned to me.

I imagined the messengers swiftly giving out warnings while searching for coyotes throughout the forest. Then my thoughts shifted to my mother. I panicked, and my eyes filled again. What if she was the next one to disappear? "Have you seen my mother?" I asked.

For the first time since I arrived at the council, the chief walked up to me, squatting to my eyelevel. He stretched out his muscular arm and placed his hand lightly on my shoulder. "All will be well now," he said to me. He turned to Adohi and instructed him to take me back home. While I was grateful to have him lead me home, all I really wanted was to find Mother. Had she made it to the council already? Had she vanished like Adohi's brother?

Adohi ran in front, guiding our way. He knew the forest well and it was hard to keep up. As we sprinted, I pictured the coyotes at my heels. Out of instinct, I turned and saw three coyotes really were behind us. I could hear the closest coyote panting behind me. Adohi turned around at the sound of my scream. My fear soared painfully through my body. I thought I'd been bitten until I heard Adohi commanding me to escape while he fought them off. Suddenly a sliver of the moon emerged from the clouds, and I could see the coyotes and Adohi wrestling on the ground. Their vicious grunts echoed in my ears as I ran.

The clouds had scattered into thin, fluffy strips framing the moon; but, I didn't see any signs of movement in the stars. Perhaps it was enough for me to just believe in their protection

than to experience it firsthand. I prayed that the angels would lead me to Mother. Her sight was better than mine, but nowhere near where Grandmother's would have been had she still been in her gazing days. At home it was clear what she meant by me being her eyes, I always guided her here and there; but out here, they guided me to have faith. As my feet carried me forward, I used the dim silver moonlight to see my path.

Once more, I prayed to the invisible angels and once again, I heard that familiar voice chime in my ears.

Follow me, the little angel whispered. This time when she glided down to me, she was alone. She guided me until we reached the edge of the yard then disappeared. I hadn't stopped running since I'd left the council with Adohi. My body was ready to collapse. I felt my heart thrashing, begging to escape my chest as I skipped every other porch step. My sporadic breathing had become its own chant.

I raced inside, accidentally slamming into my mother's stomach.

"Ayoli!" She squeezed me tighter against her. "You made it back—and by yourself."

I took her by the hand and pulled her into the den where Grandmother was so I could tell them about the angelic little people. "Ulisi," I called out, ripping around the corner of the room. "Ulisi!" I shook Grandmother's shoulder, but she didn't seem to notice. I figured she was either asleep or in one of her trances where she connects with the spirits of my father and our ancestors.

I left Grandmother alone and turned to tell Mother about the creatures. Her black hair covered the sides of her face so I didn't see the tears immediately. I heard the broken breathing and saw her trembling. I turned to Grandmother to see her reaction. She wore the same expression that she had when I came running in, calling her name. I didn't understand what caused my mother's tears and why Grandmother wasn't responding to them.

"Unitsi?"

My mother freed her hands from her face to look at me. "Yes?"

"Why are you crying? I'm okay now."

She held me for a moment. I looked at my Grandmother sitting motionless in her chair, only her face was free from the blankets. I tugged at my mother's arms until she dropped her grip around me. I walked over to Grandmother, calling her again and again.

"Ulisi?"

I shook her then climbed into her chair. I touched her leathery cheek. Cold. I poked her baggy eyelids. Mother told me to come away from Grandmother. She said that Grandmother couldn't see us anymore, that she was now a star. A little person. An angel. And we had to have faith that she would protect us, guide us. And when the nights got too dark, like they were tonight, we had to look to the moon to see her. Even if it was just a glimpse.

That Kinda Courage

Candice Lawrence

It takes courage to pack up and move somewhere, to start over again—but I ain't got that kinda courage, Scoots thought to himself while he sat on his porch. I believe in stayin'. I got that kinda courage that makes you stay put in the midst of scandal. It was that same kind of courage—"gritty courage," he called it—which kept Scoots in the small, self-run town of Bloomingdale, Georgia. It's that same kinda courage that keeps me in my late mama's house even though everyone knows I done ruined it, he thought. But I ain't never planned on lettin' the place go. It just happened. Life happened. And life *had* happened. Six years of life to be exact. All had adjusted to time passing accordingly, all accepted and embraced change by now. All except Scoots. He was still living in his mother's house when she passed six years ago. He never married, because according to him he "didn't see no point in it." He was a mama's boy, the drop out, and the only one who didn't get kicked out of the house. They called him Scoots because he just scooted past his mother while his six brothers and sisters got in trouble. So far, he'd managed to scoot out of forty-two years of trouble.

He sat in a dingy folding chair and sipped—or gulped, rather—a freshly thawed beer. It was hot out this evening, and this was his favorite pastime when dealing with the heat. He gazed around the yard. When Scoots's grandfather built the house, he set it back quite a distance from the neighboring houses. His grandmother wanted privacy from the neighbors; she also told him she wanted to enjoy nature. For this reason, the house's driveway wound yards down the side of the lawn, passing all the neighbors' houses, and finally slightly twisting its way to the street.

From where Scoots sat on the porch, he couldn't see his neighbor's house because of the pine trees surrounding the edges of his yard like a miniature forest, but, he had a clear shot of their toy-cluttered driveway. Whitney's daughter, Rachel, had been playing with a beach ball and her "My Size Barbie Jeep" when it unexpectedly down poured yesterday. He was sure the rainwater reached up to the car's two seats before it started evaporating. Scoots always thought it was strange how everyone seemed to leave their stuff outside for days at a time—but then again, in this small town, everyone was either related or knew each other; so, that kept the crime rates fairly low.

Although today's ninety degree weather made the yard look as if it hadn't rained for a month, it was the first day in two weeks that Bloomingdale hadn't seen their regular afternoon summer showers. He'd have to cut the grass soon; he always cut it for his mother and she'd have an apple pie waiting on him once he got back inside. Now that she was gone, Scoots only cut the grass when he had apple pie in the house. He'd bring one home one day this week. He eyed the compact pile of leaves towards the corner of his driveway. He remembered when he and his siblings were little, how their dad would rake all the leaves together in a pile then burn the pile. "The ashes are good fertilizer for the lawn," he'd say, "like a rebirth to the new land, new life." Occasionally, he divided the whole yard in sections then burned the lawn.

Only after having finished his beer did Scoots get up to ignite the old leaves. He watched the black smoke snake around his ankles. It smelled like ham. He walked back to the porch and picked up his beer can only to remember he'd already guzzled it. No matter, plenty mo' in the fridge, he thought, as he headed inside for a refresher.

Scoots reached to open the refrigerator but there was a roach on the handle. He picked it up and put it on the floor, watching it scurry towards some crumbs in the dark corner of the kitchen.

Ever since Ma died, 'on't nobody ever really come 'round here unless Netty brings family over from outta town, Scoots thought as he grabbed a cold one from the door. I 'on't know why she brings 'em here if I'm such an "embarrassment." They come 'round here with their noses scrunched up like they ain't never smelled a house scented with mold and mildew before. That's them natural smells I gots in this house; anybody would know that if they let stuff sit long enough.

Netty, Scoots's older sister by three years, pulled up into the driveway in their mother's white '96 Grand Marquis just as Scoots plopped back into his chair on the porch. That car was the only thing their mother left to her; if Netty had things her way, Scoots wouldn't have gotten the house, let alone the car. Netty always talked about getting the house, but when the time rolled around and their mother keeled over—it was Scoots's stuff that was already in the house and it was Scoots who had gotten Ma to agree to leave the house to him in her will.

A skinny, high heeled woman in 90's teeny-bopper clothes stepped out of the driver's seat. Her hair was cropped in a bob that stopped at the middle of her ears, her black roots leaked into her blond bangs. She had always been one of those types who would turn their back on someone without a second thought just to keep up her own appearance.

She prolly wouldn't even bring folks here if she ain't think it made her trailer house seem like one of them homes you see them famous people livin' in, Scoots once noted. But I ain't never been one for puttin' on airs; people only do that when they got somethin' to hide. I ain't got nothin' to hide.

Their older brother, Blake, and his wife, Eudora, stepped out of the car as well. They had been living in Chicago for ten years now; they didn't come down too often anymore.

"Good to see you, Scoots," Blake said.

"How goes it?"

Netty brushed past the little reunion, making a beeline for the house. They followed her inside.

"Sure has changed since Ma's been here, Netty," Blake observed as they stepped into the living room.

"Nah, I made sure er'thing's in the exact same spot as Ma left it in," corrected Scoots.

Netty shot him the look. The one where her lips squeeze up together and her eyebrows flatten out and her eyes do this weird thing where they flex and get bigger at the same time. Since Ma died, this was starting to become her regular face.

Scoots challenged the look, parting his crackling lips, showing every gap and every chipped, blackened tooth rooted in his proud mouth.

Netty shook her head then saw something move in the corner of her eye. "Watch out for that rat behind you," she warned Eudora.

Eudora jumped and muffled a shrill scream.

"Oh, he 'on't hurt nobody. Just lookin' for food like er'body else." Scoots bent over almost eye level to the overgrown rat. "Been lookin' for ya all day, buddy!"

Netty's face bunched up even tighter than before. If there was one thing she hated more than looking at Scoots, it was hearing him talk to the rodents—especially in front of company.

Scoots threw a hard piece of bread onto the floor and watched the rat nibble on the green spots.

"Could you be any more repulsive?"

"Why, I'm jus' helpin' Mother Nature reach er'body."

"If Ma only knew what she was doing when she left *you* the house. I'd almost rather see it abandoned than to see you in it."

"Well maybe you should think about that next time you bring folks over."

"Scoots," Blake interfered.

Netty pushed Eudora and Blake through the busted front door. "Let's go," she growled.

"Y'all come back now, ya hear?" Scoots yelled from the porch. He watched them back down the driveway, passing the smoking leaves. Netty shot him the look again.

June looked disappointed. "She said you were feeding me, Scoots."

The walk to North Pine from 1131 Highway 80 wasn't bad. Scoots's oldest brother June owned a little corner store there. June's was the only place where Scoots could work because June was the only person in Bloomingdale willing to hire him.

Truth be told, June's was so small that under ordinary circumstances only one re-stocker, Avery, was necessary, but, June still employed his brother anyway, despite the fact that it cost the business more to keep him. It wasn't even an issue of having to pay an extra worker; it was the fact that while this particular worker was on the clock, he consumed more than the customers did in one day.

They never heard the end of customer complaints back when Scoots was the store's greeter. Once, he "accidentally" spat tobacco on old lady Wigglebarrel's Sunday dress; ever since that day, Scoots had to unload and stock merchandise. He told June it wasn't his fault that old lady Wigglebarrel got in the way of his aim. "She had to have seen me gettin' ready to fire," he explained.

Excuse me? Kathy Baker tapped June's back. She was known for her obsessive compulsive disorder and for her forgetfulness. Often she would forget her wallet and remember

June later confided to Avery that the less customer contact Scoots had, the better business would be. June had even said that the only reason he kept his little brother around was because he had promised his mom he'd help him out after she was gone.

Scoots was already taking his second break in the first hour of his shift when June approached him.

"Netty called."

"Don't surprise me; that girl always gotta stir somethin' up 'round here. She tell you she barged up in the house with Blake and Eudora?"

June looked disappointed. "She said you were feeding rats, Scoots."

"Nah, I only seen one today. Gave him a slice or two. Ain't nothin' wrong with sharing; Ma taught us that, 'member?"

"She also taught us to take pride in our things," June muttered under his breath. "Look, you know how Netty is, don't provoke her."

"Well, I'll be darned. If she ain't make a point of tryina embarrass me...." He trailed off. "She wouldn't even care if I was homeless. Oughta be happy I got a place to live and that I keep everythin' in the house the way Ma had it."

June shook his head. "Maybe it wouldn't be such a bad thing if Netty had the house. She could fix it up real nice—"

Scoots's eyes bulged. "Fix it up? You mean change everythin'. By the time she finished fixin' it up, you wouldn't be able to recognize it. Besides I done told Netty that when I die, she can do what she will to the place."

"Excuse me?" Kathy Baker tapped June's back. She was known for her obsessive compulsive disorder and for her forgetfulness. Often she would forget her wallet and remember

just as she got to the checkout. "You all wouldn't happen to have any more of that toilet paper, would you? Oh, what's it called?" She looked at the grey concrete floor as if the name were scribbled there with chalk.

It wasn't hard for June to figure out which brand; he knew his customers. "Granite Smooth?"

"Yes, yes, that's it. Have you got any more of that?"

"Is there some in the back, Scoots?"

"How would I know? I'm on break at the moment, Miss."

Kathy's face twitched uncomfortably when Scoots spoke.

"Why don't you head towards the front and I'll bring you a pack?" June suggested.

"Sure," she replied.

Scoots stood there, not restocking shelves like Avery, but leaning on the shelf with one heavy arm hanging on the top while the other arm sat in the spot where the merchandise should have been. His bare, hardened, lard-filled stomach pressed against his blue jean overalls and sprawled onto one of the pre-stocked shelves. He rested his wooly haired head on his arm, watching Avery make two, three, now four trips in the time it should have taken to make one.

"There are about three or four boxes left in the back," Avery hinted as he set down a medium-sized box filled with smaller boxes of Little Mable's Crackers. He wiped the sweat from his forehead onto his arm and continued placing cracker boxes on the shelves.

Scoots picked up one of the boxes Avery had just stocked, "Ever had any of these?"

"Once, I guess."

Scoots opened the box and popped two handfuls of crackers into his mouth before continuing, "Oughta try some. Here."

"I'm fine," Avery replied. He wasn't one to be disrespectful so he tacked on, "Thanks. I just want to get this done." After working together at the store for a little over six years, nothing that Scoots did surprised Avery.

"So there's only three or four boxes left, huh?" he turned back toward his brother. "Well,

I'll see you tomorrow, Scoots."

"You can handle that can'tcha, tike?" Scoots asked as he started walking away, munching on the opened box of crackers. He grabbed two sodas before he rounded the corner. "I'm goin' home; see you tomorrow," he called over to Avery.

"Scoots, where are you going? Your shift isn't over for another hour." June was ringing up and bagging his neighbors Tim and Margaret's groceries, when he looked up to see Scoots headed towards the entrance.

"Avery's got it, he 'on't need my help. He's a good kid."

As Scoots approached June, Margaret turned around and stifled a gag. Tim rubbed her back, no doubt using it as an excuse to turn his head from the oncoming stench of ripe body odor.

June, who since the Wigglebarrel incident was now always hyperaware of any contact between Scoots and customers, apologized to his neighbors and rushed over before Scoots could get any closer. "Scoots, what are you doing?"

"Prolly 'bout to head on home. Eat some of that barbecue you brought over," he shrugged.

June shook his head in frustration. "No, I mean, this is a job, not some half-volunteer event."

Mr. McGregor strolled through the entrance, "Hi, June." He frowned before giving a reluctant nod. "Scoots."

Scoots grunted. "Hello, Mr. McGregor, I'll be right over." June turned back toward his brother. "Well, I'll see you tomorrow, Scoots."

Scoots strolled down Highway 80, content with his crackers and sodas. The sodas would go nice with the barbecue. He'd gotten two blocks down the street when he saw Netty's twin daughters walking out of the El Cheapo service station with a carton of cigarettes. Julia went by her middle name, Maddy, ever since her fifteenth birthday, three years ago. It seemed to give her a false sense of innocence. With a name like that, nobody could ever suspect "little Maddy" of pinning Bobby Rogers against the wall behind June's. And Renny was no better, except in appearance. She had a nonchalant attitude, and although she and Maddy were twins, Renny had this sort of natural, acquired beauty that didn't fit in a small town setting. That was how she had gotten her middle name Layla. On the days when she and her sister were actually present, it made her an outcast at Groves High.

"Ma sure is mad at you, Uncle Scoots," Maddy called out. "Ain't nothin' new." "Said she gon' get you real good this time." Scoots shrugged. "She been saying that since the day I was born."

Renny leaned against the small gas station's glass window. She had a bag of chicken from the Krispy Chic next door. She didn't bother to hide the cigarette in her free hand. Although she stood away from the two of them, her curious eyes never left Scoots.

"You coming to our eighteenth birthday party tomorrow night?" Maddy had a twisted smirk on her face.

Scoots juggled his crackers and soda. It'd been a few years since he had been invited to Netty's. He was skeptical about the idea. "I 'on't know. Y'all need to talk to your mom 'bout that."

"Nah, she already said we could invite you. She said we could invite all the family. Uncle Blake and Aunt Eudora and Uncle June and them are coming, too."

"Huh. Well, we'll just have to see."

Renny looked away from Scoots for the first time to light another cigarette.

"See y'all later," Scoots said as he started back walking down Highway 80 towards the house.

When he got to his driveway, he saw Whitney checking the mail and Rachel tacked alongside her.

Whitney nodded politely; Rachel stared in silence.

Scoots made his way into the house, stopping in the kitchen. He put one soda can in the refrigerator and left the other one out. He'd finished the box of crackers by the time he had gotten home. He went straight to the barbecue sandwich that had been sitting out on the counter for three days. There were some fruit flies nesting on it, but Scoots shooed them away before warming up the plate of food.

Around ten-thirty the next morning, Scoots addressed his bill payments and got them ready to be sent off in the mail. He walked to the post office next to El Cheapo to buy a booklet

of stamps. Inside, Mrs. Gale had taken Carol's package and set it on a rack behind the counter.

A radio was playing 97.3 in the background.

"All right, Carol, I'll see y'all Friday," said Mrs. Gale as Scoots approached the counter.

"Don't forget, and tell Earl we're having a low country boil, too. Kevin will be glad to have some company. I know he gets tired of being the only guy all the time," Carol laughed as she walked out the door.

Mrs. Gale turned her attention to Scoots. Her face paled slightly; but, she was able to manage the same cheerfulness in her voice that she had with Carol. "Hey there, what can I help you with this morning?"

"Just a book a stamps."

"All right, let me get that for you," she bent over and took in a quick breath of fresh air.

"I saw Blake last night at Piggly Wiggly. He said he and Eudora are doing well up in Chicago. It's good to see him around here again."

Scoots fumbled around in his wallet, then handed her the money. "Yeah, it is, in't it?"

Mrs. Gale looked out the window with a distant smile on her face. "You can't really stay away from a place like this for too long though, can you?" She handed him the stamps.

"Don't see how folks leave it in the first place."

Mrs. Gale smiled and pretended to whisper a secret, "They always regret it."

Scoots wiped off his forehead as he walked to June's. His overalls had already turned two shades darker from all the absorbed sweat. Just cuz I get there early don't mean I gotta work, he told himself.

"You can get 'em when I get up from here," said Scoots.

When he finally moseyed into June's, Scoots saw his brother talking to Avery. Neither of them looked comfortable. I wonder what done happened now, Scoots thought. Sure hope he ain't tryina take no day off no time soon. Ain't no way I can restock er'thing without no help. I'll just tell June I can't work that day either.

Scoots walked over to Avery and June. "Whatcha'll over here talkin' 'bout?"

Avery, who suddenly looked even more uncomfortable, turned away and started unloading boxes.

"You're here early. We were just talking business. Are you going to help Avery out early?"

"Nah, I'm too tired. Just came from the post office. Had to take care a them bills."

"Well, when you do catch your breath, go ahead and help Avery get these boxes unloaded. He didn't get a chance to finish yesterday after you left."

"All right, but that prolly won't be til my shift starts."

Scoots saw Avery pass June a side glance before pulling out another box. June headed back towards the front of the store. Scoots stretched out on some of the larger boxes until his body was fully reclined. Avery avoided making eye contact with him.

"Hand me a box a them crackers."

"They've already been stocked. There aren't any back here."

"Well what didn't you finish stockin' yesterday?"

"The last four boxes of toilet paper that you're lying on."

"Oh yeah, I fo'got 'bout them."

Avery didn't respond.

"You can get 'em when I get up from here," said Scoots.

Avery glanced at the clock above the door, "You mean in three minutes?" "You still gon' do it?" "Well I'll be darned. Time sure flies," said Scoots as he sat up. "Guess it wouldn't hurt nobody if I started early today. I *should* get paid extra for it. Bring me some a them cookie boxes."

"You already have a box opened."

"I mean to put on the shelves—unless you gon' do it."

Avery dragged several boxes over to Scoots, "Here."

Scoots kicked one of the boxes out the door, "Be right back," he called out before kicking the box across the store and into the snack aisle.

The box stopped nearly three feet away from Mrs. Parkins. She pretended not to have seen it scrape across the cement floor.

Avery rounded the corner carrying one of the boxes. "Sorry about that Mrs. Parkins, anything I can help you with?"

She smiled politely, "No thanks, Avery. How's your mom doing by the way? I heard she's been sick. I think something's going around."

"She's doing better. Tell Josh I said 'hello' when you see him."

"I will. You two need to catch up sometime."

"I'll call him and see what he's up to this weekend."

Scoots had already begun unloading his box when Avery suggested he organize the boxes in the back so that they could be stocked later.

"You gon' stock 'em?"

Avery exhaled vehemently, "Sure."

Scoots had finally finished organizing his last box when June walked in the back. "You still goin' over to Netty's tonight?" Scoots asked him.

"What am I supposed to be going over there for?"

"Maddy and Renny ain't havin' a birthday party over there, is they?"

"Naw. This is the first I'm hearing of it."

Scoots jammed two beers in his pockets; he added two more in the flap between his bare chest and the inside of his overalls. "Didn't think they were; that's why I ain't make no plans to go no way."

June looked weird—not in the same sort of "wanna throw up" way that everybody else looked at Scoots, though. "See you tomorrow, Scoots."

"Two thirty, right?"

"Twelve, Scoots. Your shift starts at twelve."

"Don't get pushy, now."

When Scoots passed old lady Wigglebarrel's house, she was sitting on the porch watching her granddaughter play in the yard. Before she had grandkids, nobody was allowed on her yard—except for her; now, only her and her grandkids were allowed on it.

Across the street from the post office, Scoots saw Maddy and Renny leaving the salon where Netty worked.

"Hi, Uncle Scoots," Maddy shouted. "You coming over to wish us a happy birthday?"

Maddy laughed wickedly before walking to the neighborhood behind the salon. Renny's curious expression caught Scoots's eye again before she finally walked away.

"Renny's got nothing to do with you being counterproductive to the store."

"No matter."

Scoots woke up around noon the next day and lazily dressed for work. By the time he got there, Avery's forehead had already accumulated a pint of sweat.

Wonder what his problem is, Scoots thought, when he saw June scowling as he strolled through the entrance. "June," he nodded, as he headed towards the back.

Before Scoots finished taking out the KayCrow boxes filled with generic soap, June had followed him into the back of the store.

"It's twelve forty-five, Scoots."

"Oh, that means my shift's forty-five minutes shorter today," he took out his navy blue handkerchief and wiped his face then his bare chest and arms. "Thanks man!"

"No, that means you don't have a shift."

Avery dropped a carton of eggs; he began awkwardly cleaning up his mess.

Scoots nestled his hands against the fat jutting out of his waist. "Whatcha mean, June?"

Avery mumbled an "Excuse me" before dashing for the exit.

"I mean between you forgetting shifts, being late, and just flat out eating the stuff that you're supposed to be putting on shelves...."

Scoots inched closer to June's face, eyes narrowed and lips snarled. "Yeah?"

June dropped his eyes and waited a moment before answering. "I have to let you go."

"You promised Ma..."

"I promised I'd help and I have. Times are getting a little harder around here. Believe it or not, it's getting a little too pricy to keep you employed, Scoots."

"Netty put you up to this, ain't she?"

"Netty's got nothing to do with you being counterproductive to the store."

"No matter."

"Look, I know it's hard. You can come stay with us if you need to." her from
 Bloom "Ya'll just don't quit, do y'all? I ain't leaving the house, June. You can take my job but
 you can't take the house." Top some food on a lunch tray and call it a day. Scoots dismantled the
 lawn "Just stay with us and let Netty fix things up again. I'm sure she'll let you move back in
 the over after she—" and cutting perfect slices, but, each slice ended up crumbling before he was
 able to "Let Netty fix the house because Netty went to Georgia Southern for Interior Design,"
 huh? We'll she ain't get no degree from there, did she? That's why she sittin' 'round in that
 ratched booth of her's tryina make herself look like somebody important. Well, she ain't no
 better than nobody else. And there ain't nothin' wrong with Ma's house. And I 'on't need y'all
 tryina make like there is." Elementary was on East Main Street just a few more blocks down
 North "Scoots—" make this walk er' day; he nodded to himself.

But it was too late; Scoots had already walked out into the store. "And I'm takin' this,"
 he snatched a pack of beer and shouted at his oldest brother. Then, he grabbed an apple pie from
 one of the tables in the front, "And this, too," he barked even louder. even and the sides of the
 coat. His stomach bulged out of the front and the pants legs barely touched his ankles. I ain't
 wore Fired from my own brother, Scoots spat as he rode his lawn mower around the yard. en
 Now ain't that somethin'. That ain't what bothers me most though. I knew what was next.
 They'd try to get Ma's house from me. Netty prolly set the whole thing up. Said she was gon'
 get me real good, 'less that was another one of them lies Maddy be tellin'. But Netty knew June
 was my last resort; er'body else had either banned me from their businesses or refused to hire
 me. But I 'on't need June. scheduled a meeting or spoken to anyone?"

Scoots was so consumed with plotting that he circled around the yard an extra two laps
 on his riding mower. I could get a job somewhere 'round here. It'd be easy.

He had overheard Ms. Williams, a lunch lady, and Ms. Patrick, a teacher from Bloomingdale Elementary, talking in June's just last week about an opening in the cafeteria. I know I could do that. Slop some food on a lunch tray and call it a day. Scoots dismounted the lawn mower and headed inside the house. After warming up the apple pie for thirty minutes in the oven, he practiced cutting perfect slices, but, each slice ended up crumbling before he was able to put it on the plate. Finally, the last piece popped out intact. He smiled to himself; I already got this down.

Scoots spat on the parking lot of June's as he turned left at the corner of North Pine and Highway 80. Bloomingdale Elementary was on East Main Street just a few more blocks down North Pine. I could make this walk er'day, he nodded to himself.

When Scoots first arrived at the school, he knew exactly where the front office was located—despite the many years that had passed since he'd last been there. His old emerald suit already had noticeable pit stains that were now dripping down his sleeves and the sides of the coat. His stomach bulged out of the front and the pants legs barely touched his ankles. I ain't wore this suit since Ma was here, he remembered. Still looks all right though, he thought when he caught his reflection in the secretary's window.

"May I help you?" The secretary asked casually before looking up and giving Scoots a startling double take.

"Yes, I'm tryina get a job in the lunchroom."

"Oh. I see. Had you scheduled a meeting or spoken to anyone?"

"Nope."

"Okay." An inquisitive expression passed across her face. "Can I get you to wait here a moment, please?"

"Mmhmm."

The secretary's eyes squinted; nevertheless, she smiled. "Great."

Her fingers quickly dialed the principal's number. "Hey, there's someone out here asking for a job in the cafeteria," she tried to whisper. "No, he's still here. Certainly." She hung up.

"The principal will be right out. You can have a seat."

Five minutes later, Scoots found himself in a small office with a long desk overflowing with paper. The metal bookshelf on the opposite wall had a few photos sitting on the edges. Scoots sat in one of the oversized, brown chairs in front of the woman's desk. A name plate that read "Principal Mildred Thompson" stared back at him.

"I'm Scoots."

"Scoots?" She reached to shake his hand.

He beamed. "That's what they call me."

"Lorrie tells me you're interested in a position in our cafeteria." Scoots noticed something unusual about her voice. It sounded very soft and comforting—somewhere between a whisper and murmur. "There aren't many requirements for the job. Have you had any experience with young children, or working in a school setting?"

"Naw, not really."

"Okay. What about with food preparation?"

"I cook at home."

Mrs. Thompson nodded her head in thought. "Do you mind if I take a look at your résumé?"

"Naw." Scoots reached as far into his pocket as the tight fabric would let him. A rush of body odor escaped through his movement. "Here you go."

Mrs. Thompson briefly lifted her wrist as if trying to smell some perfume on it before taking Scoots's résumé. With the exception of his name, address, and a sentence reading "Objective: To get a job," the paper was almost blank. Mrs. Thompson chewed her lip and discreetly rubbed her left temple.

"Why don't you tell me a little bit about yourself?"

"Well, I live right down the street. I used to work at June's—I restocked stuff there."

"How did that job end?"

"June had money trouble. Said it was gettin' too expensive to keep me on staff."

Mrs. Thompson scanned the folded, irrelevant document once more. "I see it says you attended Savannah High. Did you graduate from there?"

"Naw."

"Well, as I mentioned earlier, there aren't many requirements for this position; however, we do ask that you have a high school diploma or the equivalent. And just as a helpful tip, this isn't the usual protocol for applying for the cafeteria staff. It's an online process and the training begins after you are hired. We may have the position filled soon, but there is an opening for janitorial staff. If you went back to school or got your GED—"

"For that? Oh, that's too much work."

"All right. Well, that's really all I can offer you. I wish you luck. And I appreciate your interest." Mrs. Thompson stood and shook Scoots's hand once more.

"All right, then. Thanks anyway."

It's gotta be somethin' 'round here I can do, Scoots thought as he walked home. With the ninety-five degree weather and a heat index of one hundred, his clothes were beyond drenched. His suit coat was strewn about his shoulder; as he walked, he held his forehead in his hand. I ain't goin' back to June. Wonder what Ma would say if she knew he done fired me? Prolly chew him out real good and Netty too for puttin' him up to it. But I ain't lettin' them stop me from workin' and keepin' that house.

The following week, he saw Maddy and Renny lingering around his mailbox. he heard "Whatcha'll doin', now?" "Nothing, Uncle Scoots," Maddy smiled sweetly.

"Mmhhh. Well, ya best not be meddlin' in things ya ain't got no business meddlin' with." Maddy's innocent smile slipped into a twisted grin so that the resemblance between her and Netty was clear. "Why, we'd never, Uncle Scoots."

"Ya'll go on from here," Scoots swatted from the porch. He watched his nieces retreat into the wooded area across the street. Roughly ten minutes later, Renny emerged, oblivious to Scoots watching from the porch. Fifteen minutes later, a tousled Maddy reappeared, staggering, giggling. She followed Renny down Highway 80.

And they say I'm a disgrace, scoffed Scoots as he turned away from the busted front door and grabbed a beer from the refrigerator. Scoots had barely gotten comfortable when he heard a knock on the door. He answered, only to see Netty standing in stilettos, short shorts, and a mid-drift cut off and with her face caked on as if it were a baked clay mask. She looked livid and disgusted.

"Have you seen Maddy and Renny?"

"You mean you actually wanna know where your kids are?"

"How's the job search?" Netty back spat with a contorted smirk.

"Maybe if you spent more time worryin' 'boutcha kids instead of me, you'd know where they were."

"Shut up, Scoots."

"They was off in them woods, then they went back up the street. Now kindly get off the property." Scoots slammed the door before Netty had time to retort, but he was certain he heard pieces of a chopped up stream of angry insults between the clonking of high heels against the driveway.

No matter, he shrugged and sunk back down to the couch. He sipped his drink just as a cockroach began to charge towards it. He flipped through the Pennysaver, looking for any jobs he could apply for dealing with lawn work. Most of the jobs required five to ten years of experience as a minimum; but, there was one company—McGregor's Garden and Landscaping—that only recommended one year of experience.

Scoots eagerly contacted the number on the ad.

"McGregor's Garden and Landscaping, this is Tony speaking. How may I help you?"

"Hey Tony, I just seen your dad's ad in the paper. I wanna apply. This is Scoots."

"All right, if you hang on a second, he'll be right here. He's talking to a customer at the moment."

"Okay. Y'all workin' tomorrow?"

"Yes sir, bright and early."

"Where at?"

"Well, I know we have a few houses and—oh, here's my dad."

"Hello? Scoots?"

"Hey, Mr. McGregor. I seen y'all lookin' for somebody to help with the yard work and stuff."

"We are..."

"I'd like to help."

After a brief pause, Mr. McGregor answered, "Is that right? What happened to you working at June's? Heard you got fired."

"Yeah. I did," Scoots sounded unapologetic. "It ain't get to me, though. Still kickin' hard as ever. June and Netty ain't—"

"Now hold on. I'm not getting involved in that whole family squabble you folks have going on. I just want to know why you got fired."

"Why 'on't you have your wife ask Netty next time she go get her hair done."

"Do you want the job or not?"

"June ain't want me there. His and Netty's way of tryina get me out Ma's house. Know I gotta make a livin'. June come talkin' 'bout it was gettin' too expensive to keep me."

Mr. McGregor considered this for a brief moment before recalling how Scoots used to handle customer service at June's. "Is that right? Well, you know I can always verify this excuse with June, if need be."

"Gon' 'head."

Scoots overheard Tony in the background asking Mr. McGregor about loading a piece of equipment. A few minutes later, Mr. McGregor seemed slightly more concerned with the real purpose of Scoots's call. "What experience do you have?"

"Cut my own yard."

"Uh huh." Scoots noticed a shift in Mr. McGregor's voice, as if he were a little too preoccupied and desperate to turn down help. "Well, if you're serious, I reckon Tony can train you. Just don't bring any of that nonsense to this job. Are you still interested?"

"Sure am."

"Okay. Why don't you come on down tomorrow to 23 Drescher Road around eight o'clock? We have one house there, then another over on Oak Street."

"Sounds good. I'll see you there."

"See you tomorrow, Scoots."

Good ole McGregor. He ain't never been too fond of me, and I him; but, I sure am glad fo' this job. It's either this or go back to June and let Netty have the house. And I ain't havin' that. Besides, I know I can do lawn work. Ma used to always say how well I kept the yard. Said I was real good at it.

Sure do miss Ma. She knew how much I loved this house and how much I'd hold on to. Er'body else who done moved out done fo'got about what we had. They up and left and ain't care to keep some stuff the same. I see what change done brought on. June done put business over family. Jared done moved to Canada, and Blake hardly eva show his face 'round here anymore, then there's Charles who went off and died just as soon as he moved out. And Edna all but swore she'd have nothin' to do with any of us soon as Ma died. Then of course Netty so quick to disown people who 'on't fit in with her wannabe celebrity act. All of them done fo'got we used to be family. All of them done fo'got what Ma and Pa created. All of them done throwed it all away. Only proof's this here house and me.

Shortly afterwards, he saw Netty and Maddy peeping through the blinds at him.

Tony didn't have to give Scoots too much training on the job. He only had to tell Scoots once not to ride on the street in the lawn mower. The hardest part was meeting Mr. McGregor's standards for how precise he wanted the edges cut. Still, Mr. McGregor was undoubtedly impressed with Scoots's work.

Roughly three weeks in, Mr. McGregor was going over the list of houses and business for the next day with Scoots and Tony. "We've got that house on Drescher again and we'll go around the corner and hit that salon where your sister works, Scoots."

"All right, I'll see y'all then," said Scoots as the McGregor's dropped him off for the night.

Bet Netty'll be surprised to see me out there tomorrow, 'specially with how good I'm doin' and all. "Let's hear her tell er'body 'bout that," Scoots said as he threw a chunk of fat from his roast onto the floor for the rats to devour.

They had started landscaping the house on Drescher around nine o'clock; but, that only guaranteed a longer day. Mr. McGregor was an early riser and a perfectionist at that. He was a quiet, serious man who was passionate about his yard work. For him, work didn't stop when the customer was satisfied—he'd still see to it that every edge had been wacked, every leaf was trimmed so precise that if the bushes were measured they'd all come out even, and not a trace of the lawn shavings were left on the sidewalks or driveways. It was well into the afternoon by the time they had finally moved on to the salon.

While Scoots was helping Tony pack the pine straw around the front of the salon, he caught Maddy slipping inside. Scoots shook his head. She ain't nearly as sneaky as she thinks. Shortly afterwards, he saw Netty and Maddy peeping through the blinds at him.

"Looking good, Scoots," called Mr. McGregor.

"Thank ya." Scoots cranked the lawn mower, making greenish-white strips of freshly mowed grass up and down the lawn. Maddy ran back out of the salon and opened Netty's car, fumbling with a bundle of salon products. Scoots caught a glimpse of Netty in the window looking anxious and excited.

Maddy returned carrying a bundle of tools in her arms, including a pair of electric clippers with its cord slithering behind her in the grass. She gave a final scan of the yard towards Mr. McGregor—who was busy showing Tony a new shaping technique with one of their more recently purchased Weed Wackers—before sauntering in front of the mower. Scoots watched his niece wearily, wondering what she was up to. Maddy peered at the window where her mother had been, then gave a deliberate yank to the dragging cord so that it caught underneath the mower's blade, producing a sudden rattle and crunch. Within a few seconds, the mower had tugged and chewed on the cord with enough force to cause the cord to go taut then suddenly drop as Maddy screamed and fell.

She was sprawled out on the lawn struggling to reach her oddly twisted ankle. Scoots had swerved into the street in an attempt to dodge Maddy. The electric cord was now severed, exposing an inner mess of thin wire and copper.

"Maddy!" Netty screamed as she dashed down the salon porch.

Mr. McGregor ran towards Maddy, "What happened?"

"She walked in front of me on purpose. I seen her."

Mr. McGregor helped Maddy sit up. "Are you okay, young lady?"

"I think so," Maddy tried to snifle. "One minute I was just carrying the stuff my mom sent me to get and—"

"Does that hurt?"

"Yes."

Scoots glanced at Netty who flashed him an evil smile while Mr. McGregor and Tony continued examining Maddy's ankle.

"It's probably just a mild sprain, Ma'am," Tony told Netty. "Just have her put some ice on it and she should be good to go. We're sorry about this."

"Naw. Netty and her was plannin' it soon as they seen how good I am."

Mr. McGregor's face reddened with anger. "Scoots, do you not realize I have good grounds to fire you? I told you from the start don't bring any of your family disputes to this job."

"I ain't brought nothin' but hard work. But if ya gon' fire me, go on. Don't be makin' threats."

Netty shook her head and interrupted the shouting. "How could you do this to your own niece, Scoots?" She knelt beside Maddy then looked up at the McGregors'. "I'd just like for him to kindly get off the property," Netty said, gesturing towards Scoots.

Tony carried Maddy into the salon while Mr. McGregor pulled Scoots aside.

"I had half a mind not to fire you despite the fact that right now my reasons for letting you go outnumber my reasons for keeping you." Mr. McGregor wore a bitter expression and spoke through his teeth, "but, since you insist I don't make threats. You're out."

Scoots got off the lawnmower. By then Tony was putting the last pieces of equipment onto the truck; Maddy and Netty were sitting on the salon porch listening. "Do whatcha will." Scoots walked back down Highway 80, headed home.

There's no way I'm lettin' Netty have the house. Just ain't happenin'. She care mo' 'bout it than anybody, anyway. Puttin' Maddy up to that. Just like her to be gettin' in my way. But she ain't never had what I got and she never would. I had courage to thank fo' that.

I started in the master bath with the four candles Ma had on the sides of the whirlpool. I laid 'em on their sides; one on the cream tile floor, one in the marble pool, one on the side of the tub, next to the mildewed, rose shower curtain, and the last one under the sink beside all of the cleaners that had gone unused since Ma last placed her glove covered hands on them a li'l over six years ago. In that same order, I lit the candles, taking in their fresh linen scent as their flames gripped more than just wax and wick.

I went to the master bedroom next. I took the kerosene lamp Pa surprised Ma with on their twentieth anniversary—she always had liked fire—I brought life to the lamp then sat it in the middle of the king sized bed. The glow grew brighter til I watched the sheets dance in the flames before I moved onto the hallway. I heard an explosion come from the master bathroom, but I continued. That was a side effect of gritty courage; once your mind was made up, and things got a rollin', wasn't nothin' left to stop you.

June, Blake, Charles, and Jared's bedroom was across from Ma and Pa's. I found a old lighter in Charles's nightstand drawer. He and June used to share that nightstand; Charles had the top, June, the bottom. I took out the red plastic tube filled with lighter fluid then spun the wheels, ignitin' a spark. Wasn't much left. I gave it another good spin, letting the flames catch the yellowed stack of papers on Jared's desk. I took one of the cracklin' papers then laid it on Blake's bookshelf.

I went into Netty and Edna's old bedroom—the room I had slept in til I was twelve and my “testosterone” became too much for my older sisters and me to handle. Ma had also put two

candles in our bedroom. Said it added flair. I carried 'em into the closet, placing 'em where Netty's old blue prom dress would dangle just above the flame. I lit the sleeve of her dress for an added touch.

From our bedroom, I came to the living room and kitchen. In the top drawer on the left of the stove was the fire starter Pa used to use to grill. Plenty of fluid in it. I went to the pantry, allowing the flame to hug the napkins and paper plates before it jumped to Pa's wine collection. The living room was last. Just added some burning heat to the dead plants and listened to the soundtrack of fire.

It'd be a long night before the house was completely gone. I grabbed a beer from the fridge then sat out on the front porch. My lips spread across my teeth after each cool sip. This was that gritty courage.

"Well, Darlin' I'm sorry but I've already made three batches of deviled eggs. You know Sandra's kids just gobble everything up. You'd think she's never fed them a home-cooked meal in their--well, she probably hasn't considering she's always busy trying to weasel her way out of work. I swear I've never met anyone as lazy as her. She's always signing her name off on everything, then disappearing just as soon as you ask for help. But anyway, you go on ahead and fix those ribs George has been asking for. And don't bother with the drinks. Remember the last time you made lemonade? People hacked up seeds the rest of the night."

There was a brief pause on the other end, but Mrs. Betty failed to notice, nor would she have cared to inquire about it. "All right, dear. See you later," she added before hanging up.

Mrs. Betty was a fast talker. Bold and unapologetic. Nothing that had ever spewed out of her mouth caused her any sense of remorse—although, the same couldn't be said for her listeners.

¹ Loose reference to Betty's role of Cagney the Elephant's "Black Stabbin' Betty."

Back Stabbin' Mrs. Betty¹

Candice Lawrence

There are people who follow rules and there are rules that follow people. Mrs. Betty fell into the latter category, making rules for everyone else, but never bothering to abide by any regulations which were not of her own creation. She took any means necessary to ensure things went as she wanted; whether she was campaigning for her husband, hosting neighborhood dinner parties, or slyly and ever so forcefully coaxing her neighbors to keep her as the President of the Homeowner's Association. In the end, Mrs. Betty always got her way.

She tugged on the cream colored, coiled telephone cord for a few more inches of leeway while talking to her neighbor Ginny Dinchen on the other end and whipping up another batch of mustard potato salad. "Well, Darlin' I'm sorry but I've already made three batches of deviled eggs. You know Sandra's kids just gobble everything up. You'd think she's never fed them a home cooked meal in their—well, she probably hasn't considering she's always busy trying to weasel her way out of work. I swear I've never met anyone as lazy as her. She's always signing her name off on everything, then disappearing just as soon as you ask for help. But anyway, you go on ahead and fix those ribs George has been asking for. And don't bother with the drinks. Remember the last time you made lemonade? People hacked up seeds the rest of the night."

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¹ Loose reference to first verse of Cage the Elephant's "Back Stabbin' Betty."

She wandered into the dining room, balancing on her arms two trays of hors d'oeuvres for her cul-de-sac's biweekly barbecue.

She wasn't what you'd initially think of as a ninety-four year old woman sitting up in a nursing home, gathering a collection of bed sores. In fact, she was the opposite. Quick, active, always keeping up with the changes that Pooler, Georgia, threw at her. And yet, she seemed like one of those people who had always been old. Some speculated that she was born a spunky, bitter old woman. But that was merely talk...

Across the street, in front of the peach colored home of 761 Lake Road, Kity's glasses slipped off the bridge of her nose, down toward the cement and under the path of her next door neighbor Sandra Resano's bulldog's stomach before she could catch them. It was her second pair of oversized bifocals in two weeks. Her other pair had gotten crunched between *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* while she was restocking library shelves. Her father insisted upon naming her Kity Doc Crinn, because he just knew she'd be a doctor—either medical or academic. Nevertheless, the closest she ever got was being a part time librarian at the West Chatham Public Library. Still, she tried to slide in her useless knowledge whenever she saw fitting.

With her hands in her pockets, Sandra Resano sauntered down her driveway to check the mail just as Jesse's chunky body flattened Kity's glasses. Kity considered kicking Jesse while trying to shoe him off; but for all her effort, he simply looked at her then finally rolled over when Sandra called his name.

"Whoops. Sorry about that, Doc." Sandra scratched Jesse's ears while babbling in some chummy, unintelligible voice.

"It's all right. Actually, I wanted to tell you, I was researching the scientific effects of how the human body interprets animalistic behaviors and I found that we really have the same basic functions as animals. Dogs roll over; people roll over. It's all much in the same—"

"That's great, Doc. Did you tell Mrs. Betty I won't be able to cook anything for the next barbecue?"

"Ginny told her. She said Mrs. Betty wasn't happy but that she pretty much expected that sort of thing from you."

Sandra looked dumbfounded. "Well, the kids have soccer at the Y."

"Can't Nathan take them? He does coach the team after all."

"He...well, it's my night to take them."

"You know, I read in one of those family counseling books that the more time children spend doing athletic activities with their fathers, the better off they'll be. It's also true for gardening; plants are more likely to grow with the more activity they get" she frowned "—or was that in that book about sea turtles? I'll have to look it up again."

Sandra was already making her way back up the driveway.

"Anyway," Kity shouted across the yard before her voice faded, "I'll see you tomorrow."

Kity led a sad life—not by fate's choice, however. It was Kity who'd messed up her own life. She spent her days stupidly memorizing any and every book she could get her hands on, only to get her facts mixed up. At some point in her life, she foolishly convinced herself that if she'd retained enough, it would equate to having earned her Doctorate. She became so obsessed, that she'd forgotten how to relate to others and worst of all, she was too oblivious to realize there was more to life than her unattained Doctorate.

¹ French for "Where is the bakery?"

A sparkling, black 1994 Jaguar blazed past Kity in the cul-de-sac. Daphene J. Ross pulled into her driveway, her chestnut hair bundled in the silk scarf her husband had gotten her on his most recent flight to France. She was the perfect reincarnation of 1940's Hollywood glamour. And she was as much of a wannabe diva as anyone could get. When she married pilot Kevin Ross, it wasn't just her last name she changed; she became one of those: a Daph-EN-ee as opposed to Daphne.

"Au revior, Katie," Daphene called out to Kity.

"Doc. And that actually meant, 'To the moon'. You used it in the wrong context. For 'How are you?' you should have said, 'Où est la boulangerie²?' I'm sure you'd know that had you looked up *French for Dummies*."

"Sure, Danielle."

"Doc."

Mrs. Betty stepped out of her front door, holding a hose. One of the perks of having her house as the middle house in the cul-de-sac: it made things easy for her. She could still organize things, find out things, and control things from the comfort of her front porch. "Ladies, I wanted to talk to you all about this weekend. Instead of the cookout, we're having a formal dinner at our place. I expect everyone to be there to support my husband."

Daphene was busy looking into her side mirror, replenishing her mascara. "Yeah, I won't be there."

Mrs. Betty's grey eyes remained calm, her voice hushed. "And why is that?"

"I've decided I'm throwing a luau," Daphene replied, sounding as if she were bored with her own idea.

² French for "Where is the bakery?"

Kity shook her head in disbelief. "That's not how we do things around here."

"She's our new neighbor, Kity. She doesn't know the rules," Mrs. Betty turned back towards Daphene, "but let me clue you in. This dinner is not just our biweekly; it's for my husband's campaign for mayor. Mess this up because you and some other drunken twenty-something year olds want to have a scantily clad costume party, and I'll see to it that you regret it." Mrs. Betty walked gracefully back to the pile of hose she left in her yard then began watering her lawn.

She had run this neighborhood since its beginnings and by now, she'd developed and maintained her reputation. It wasn't just her reputation that kept her needing to stay in control, though. She had her own plans for Pooler. She wanted business, people, opportunity. The opportunities her father had promised her when he moved their family to Pooler, Georgia, after his coal mining job slowed. The opportunities that were stolen from her when she was in her early teens and her father was killed in a freak railroad accident and her mother died not long afterwards. Mrs. Betty sought to have all the new beginnings she was promised as a child without having to wait for fate to provide them.

"What's Dee bringing?"

Ginny sat in her sunroom with Sandra, discussing plans for Mrs. Betty's dinner.

"I guess we could have a moon bounce in the living room," Ginny tried to joke, but it wasn't funny.

"I'll bring over some mashed potatoes and green bean casserole. Will you ask Daphene to bring something over for dessert? I'm not sure how she cooks yet; at least with dessert, there is always a chance that people are too full to eat any."

Sandra rolled her eyes and Ginny looked perplexed.

"Yeah, I'll ask her. She's doing a luau for the formal dinner, right? That's how I've been planning out the lists and menu."

"No, Ginny. They're two separate events."

A look of enlightenment flashed on Ginny's face. "Oh, the luau is the after party, then."

"Just don't worry about the luau. I'm thinking we should do something big, you know, to attract the neighborhood's attention."

Ginny tried to joke once more. "Too bad we can't do fireworks."

"Why can't we?"

"Mrs. Betty would kill us. It's like the second rule in the *Homeowner's Association Handbook*."

"Well, I'm sure she won't mind as long as it benefits the campaign. We can probably bend the rules a bit."

"What did you say you were bringing again? Mashed potatoes and what else?"

"No, I said garlic bread and pasta salad."

Ginny scribbled down the new items onto her menu.

"What's Doc bringing?"

"Oh, who knows? Probably a stack of novels."

As if she'd heard her name, Kity came trampling around the corner of Ginny's house with a binder full of reports, books, and index cards.

"I got the dinner arrangements all figured out. According to statistics, it's better if the food corresponds with the outfits everyone is wearing. If we wear brown clothes, we should serve brown foods."

Sandra rolled her eyes and Ginny looked perplexed.

"I also brought these flash cards that have the most accurate etiquette rules. Here, Ginny, this one says salute your guest upon arrival. I know greetings aren't always your thing, so hopefully that will remind you." Kity pulled out another index card, "And this one is for you, Sandra. It's to remind you not to wear any article of clothing that fights so tightly it will show each morsel of food you eat; that probably goes for that vest you like to wear to the biweekly's."

Kity, "And what does your card say, Doc?"

"Continue to be admirable."

"Go figure."

"I've made seating arrangements for the table as well. Each chair will have predetermined questions to ask after the speeches are made."

"Speeches?"

"Well, you can't have a dinner lecture without a lecture, now, can you?"

"So now it's a formal lecture luau dinner?"

"Ginny. Forget the luau."

Ginny scratched through a few lines of her notes.

Mrs. Betty backed out of her garage in her red 1994 Mustang convertible. "I want people to be sure when I come and go," she'd once told her husband.

She spotted Daphene adding tiki torches to her lawn. Mrs. Betty pulled in front of Daphene's mailbox. "Where are those going?"

"In the yard for the luau."

"Uh-huh. You do realize that they can't be placed in your yard, though? Unless you want a fine for each of them," Mrs. Betty smiled and drove out of the cul-de-sac.

She often went on daily drives around the neighborhood to monitor its on-goings. After she made her rounds there, she spread out to the main drag, stopping to see what new businesses were coming along with new neighborhoods. Through her husband, she'd heard that there was going to be a museum coming to commemorate The Mighty Eighth Air Force. She could just imagine the other future opportunities. She'd seen little fast food shops like Cracker Barrel, KFC, Wendy's, and Burger King open; she'd seen hotels accumulate near the airport. She'd even seen miniature store outlets emerge along the sides of the main drag. And for Mrs. Betty, these were all signs of the promise of new life.

By the following morning, Ginny had left a series of frantic messages on Sandra's answering machine.

6:30 a.m. "Sandra, I can't find my notes for the dinner. Did you take them?"

6:45 a.m. "Sandra, did you say you'd make cherry pie?"

7:03 a.m. "Sandra, what time are you coming?"

7:04 a.m. "SANDRA, CALL ME!"

This was typical Ginny-esque behavior. Her level of disorganization could make a seven-year-old seem like he had the organizational skills of a professional. With the combination of this and Ginny's unfailing ability to misunderstand the obvious, she always melted down to a confused, forgetful, bubbling mess.

Sandra lounged in her warm bed for another four hours before finally getting up. She'd heard Ginny leave the messages, but she thought she'd deal with them on her own time. She was tired, and while she had come up with extravagant dinner ideas last night, now, she wanted nothing to do with the party. Her only reasoning: *Rosanne* and the pile of movies she and

Nathan had rented. She could have watched them any day but it just so happened that she felt during the dinner was just as good of time as any. It was times like this when she was glad for her two children; she'd just tell everyone that she had to take the kids to practice. After all, it wasn't her first rodeo.

Funny Daphene's collection of party decorations had grown extensively by the afternoon. Somehow, she had managed to turn her lawn into a makeshift bonfire pit surrounded with plastic logs from Smith's Hardware. Her husband was due back from a flight to London later that evening. And as usual, she would be ready for him—and his foreign gifts.

you was Last month he brought her "the finest of cashmere sweaters" with a bottle of Chanel No.5 wrapped inside the folded sleeves. Sometimes he'd bring her foreign books that no one in the States had heard of yet. They were big spenders, fast spenders, who made even the Jones'es envious.

Mrs. Betty sat out on her porch, keeping her regular surveillance and finding all the ways in which Daphene could be fined through the Homeowner's Association. Meanwhile, Ginny and Kity anxiously trudged up Mrs. Betty's driveway. Mrs. Betty had seen the look before; she knew what was coming before they'd lifted their lowered, cowardly heads to say Sandra had backed out of the dinner.

was an She strode past Ginny and Kity, charging towards Sandra's front door. Being the hawk eye that she was, she didn't miss the curtains in the front living room hurriedly shift then yank back into place. Mrs. Betty knocked on the door, calling Sandra.

the close A sheepish, uncomfortable-looking Sandra peeped through the glass side window which framed her front door. After a few seconds, Sandra and Mrs. Betty stood on the front steps; Mrs. Betty's grey eyes were cool and level—she was always one to keep her composure.

"What's the excuse this time, Sandra? It can't be soccer, because Ginny's kids are on the same team and they don't have any soccer related engagements. So what's it this time?"

"Well..."

"Well," she paused, "that sounds like one of the best excuses you've had in a long time. Funny how you make so many plans and not one of them you commit to. Speaking of commit, where were you when Nathan had to work last week and I picked up your beloved children from school two hours after dismissal because Dear Old Mom never showed up? I'd hate to think what Nathan would say had he known this was the fourth time this year. I'll tell you one thing, if you want to keep things good with Nathan, you'll see to it that things go smoothly at the dinner."

Mrs. Betty wheeled on Kity and Ginny, who had made their way to Sandra's mailbox to eavesdrop. She gracefully passed by giving them a mere, "Excuse me," before crossing the cul-de-sac.

Daphene was rearranging her decorations for the third time that afternoon when Mrs. Betty made her way over from Sandra's. Mrs. Betty reached into her clutch purse and pulled out an annotated copy of the *Homeowner's Association Handbook* along with an invoice charging no less than one hundred dollars for each plastic log, seventy-five for each hole dug up for tiki torches, fifty for the torches themselves, and another fifty for each inflatable hula dancer. There was an asterisk next to the charge that brought on a threat of "additional fees up to \$500 for disruption of peace." Inside the handbook's cover was a slip of paper stating: "Don't let this intrude on your lavish lifestyle—I'm sure your husband can afford it. As a housewarming gift, the charges will be dropped provided that you attend the formal dinner without causing any other conflicts. P.S. This is how I run things. Welcome to The Lakes."

Without a single spoken word, Mrs. Betty was off once more. Kity was waiting on her at her driveway, holding an overflowing binder and tote bag full of DIY lecture books.

"I know you had plans for the dinner, but I just wanted to show you the more effective ways of hosting a dinner lecture." Kity flipped through her binder, "It says that there should be two minute speeches for every amount of dishes served. If everyone brings two dishes, that'd be..." her eyes drifted upward as she attempted to calculate, "ten speeches. Or does it mean twenty ten minute speeches?"

"Kity. Let me give you a little advice. It is a *dinner*. There is no lecture. No speeches. No mathematical formulas involved. It's a gathering where people eat and socialize. Are we clear?"

"But research proves—" Betty sliced her baked chicken breast and looked up from her plate. "That if you don't scurry along with your notes, books, and index cards, things will get far more complicated at the library. I heard Shelia is looking to cut back on staff, she asked me confidentially my thoughts on the matter; wouldn't it be wretched for me to tell her I think you're the reason so many books have permanently disappeared?"

Kity was speechless.

Mrs. Betty patted Kity on the shoulder, "See you at the dinner, Kity."

Mrs. Betty walked into her house, but there was one more thing left to do before the dinner. She reached for the telephone while sitting on one of her kitchen stools then began dialing.

Ginny answered. "I'm so glad you called, I was just going to stop by. I've got a list of all the things for the luau dinner. I've already assigned everyone to little jobs. I was thinking the

luau part would balance the formal part—unless it's a formal luau..." Ginny waited for Mrs. Betty to laugh, but as usual, there was silence.

"And what about those fireworks you and Sandra wanted? Did you get those, too?"

"...No..."

"Hmm. Good to know. Can you imagine how embarrassed Craig would be to arrest his own wife over some fireworks? You're probably better off letting me take care of the arrangements. Just make sure you show up—and do us a favor by buying anything you decide to bring. We can't afford to have you getting everyone sick at this dinner. Nice chat, Ginny."

During the dinner, Mrs. Betty sliced her baked chicken breast and looked up from her plate, examining her work. There was Ginny, who had brought a gallon of sherbet from Piggly Wiggly as her dish; there was Kitty, who was for once not annoying anyone with misconstrued facts—albeit perhaps because she was still in a speechless stupor; there was Daphene, who was so distracted by the new diamond pendant her husband brought her that she'd forgotten about the luau; then there was Sandra, who despite her inward objection, showed up earliest of all the guests and helped with preparing the dinner. Mrs. Betty smiled to herself then forked another piece of sliced chicken breast. "After all," she thought, "I always get my way."

